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The below picture - Indian
Painting of the last great Cree-Blackfoot

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THE LAST BATTLE

By G.A. Kennedy

The following article appeared in the Lethbridge News dated April 30th, 1890. Dr. Kennedy, writer of the article 55 years ago, was North West Mounted Police physician at Fort Macleod.

It is to be noted that the nomenclature of the rivers at Lethbridge has been changed since the article was written in 1890. The river at Lethbridge now known as the Oldman River, was at that time called the Belly River.

The accompanying picture painted on ~~buffalo hide~~ buckskin tells the complete story of the battle.

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THE LAST BATTLE

It is within the knowledge of most of the residents of the Northwest, that the Indian population of the Territories is composed mainly of two great divisions -- the Crees and Assiniboines forming one, and the Blackfoot Confederacy or the Blackfeet, Bloods, and Piegans the other. Speaking different languages, inhabiting different though adjoining parts of the Territories, and with different manners and customs, they have been enemies from time immemorial, and it is unquestionably due to this fact that the rebellion of 1885 was so quickly and easily put down. Had the Blackfeet forgotten their old enmity and joined hands with the Crees, it is hardly possible to calculate the enormous additional loss of life and property that would have followed, and we cannot therefore be too devoutly thankful that out of evil there came good -- that an hereditary feud between the two great camps was the means of ensuring peace and safety to a large and populous part of the Northwest.

I have said that most nor'westers are aware of the two great divisions, and possibly of the fact that they are mutually antagonistic; but I venture to say that few of them know that, at the present site of the Galt coal mine, these two races came together in mortal combat, and fought out one of the greatest Indian battles of the past fifty years. I propose telling the story as briefly as possible because I believe the event to be

worthy of record, and also of interest to the people of Canada. Additional incentives are found in the fact that I know the ground well and have the details of the battle from an eye witness who was also a participant.

It was late in the fall of 1870. The preceding year, smallpox had swept through the tribes, and left in its wake whole camps of "dead lodges". (A "dead lodge" is, or was one of the burial customs of these Indians. When a brave died he was rolled in robes, his arms and trappings were laid beside him, along with enough food and water to last him on his journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds, and the lodge was left standing over him. These lodges were never disturbed.) The mortality was estimated by competent authorities at forty or fifty percent. The Crees and Assiniboines thought this a favorable opportunity to strike a decisive blow at their powerful enemy, and accordingly organized and despatched a war party, numbering in the neighborhood of six or eight hundred braves. Big Bear, Piapot, Little Mountain, and Little Pine -- names which became rather well known in '85 -- were among the Crees and Assiniboine Chiefs, either present themselves or represented by their bands, and they were largely reinforced by the South Assiniboines.

The Blackfeet and Bloods were then camped mainly on Belly River between Kipp and Whoop-Up, two whisky trading posts about twenty miles apart, but the Blackfeet themselves were not numerically strong. The South Peigans were camped on the St. Mary, above Whoop-Up, which is at the junction of the Belly and St. Mary, having been driven to this side of the line by the American

Expedition against them under Col. Baker. Big Leg, Black Eagle, and Heavy Shield were their chiefs. Crow Eagle led the North Peigans, and Bull Back Fat and Button Chief the Bloods. The South Peigans were well armed with repeating rifles, needle guns, and revolvers, the Bloods were not so well equipped, while the Crees and Assiniboines had only old muskets, Hudson Bay fukes,and bows and arrows to depend on.

The Crees reached Little Bow, about twenty-five miles away, and small parties from the main band, sent out to reconnoitre, succeeded in stealing several horses from small camps about Whoop-Up. One night, however, about the 25th of October, the whole band set out and descended on a few lodges about three miles above Whoop-Up, on Belly River, killing a brother of Red Crow, Chief of the Bloods and two or three squaws. The noise aroused the whole Blood camp. which was in the immediate vicinity, and in a few minutes their braves were engaging the enemy, while messengers were riding in hot haste to alarm the South Peogans.

Such was the commencement of probably the only purely Indian pitched battle in the Canadian Northwest,of which we have any authentic record.

The first faint streaks of dawn had hardly begun to show in the east when the Peigans came up and the fight became general; the Crees slowly retreating across the prairie toward the present site of Lethbridge (the distance between the rivers here is four or five miles) and the Blackfeet following. The river banks reached, the Crees took up their position in a large coulee

running up from the river and out on the prairie, while the Peigans, after much difficulty, succeeded in establishing themselves in a shorter coulee to the south. A large number of Bloods and Blackfeet were in a small coulee to the north, and on the prairie to the north and west, but they found themselves too much exposed, and during the progress of the fight, gradually worked around to the south. The Crees on the whole had much the best position. The horses of course were stationed in the bottom out of range.

The main fighting seemed to have been between the two coulees first described. They are parallel, from three to four hundred feet wide, and separated by a ridge varying in width from thirty to two hundred feet. Here for over four hours the battle raged, the braves crawling to the edge of the coulee and exchanging shots with the more adventurous of the enemy. A head, a hand, a piece of blanket or robe -- anything was enough to shoot at. It was a contest in which skill and cunning in taking advantage of the inequalities of the ground came largely into play. It is stated that several were badly injured by heavy stones thrown across the narrowest part of the ridge from one coulee into the other. Two Peigans attempted to gallop down the ridge for purpose of ascertaining the strength and position of the enemy, one was killed outright, and the other badly wounded and his horse killed under him. In all during this time about a dozen Blackfeet were killed, and a large number wounded. It is impossible to say how many Creed were killed.

The Peigans finally got a strong force of braves behind a

butte, which in a measure commanded the Cree coulee, and the fire from them and from their friends in the coulee, became hotter and hotter, until the Crees, becoming alarmed, began to effect a strategic movement to the rear by slipping out of the coulee and making for the river. At this instant, Jerry Potts, a half-breed Peigan (he afterwards became famous as a police guide), who was reconnoitering around the bank of the ridge facing the river, perceived this movement, and made a sign to his companions in the coulee to charge, and charge they did. Some on horseback, some on foot, they poured over the ridge and down the coulee, driving the now panic stricken Crees before them, and killing without quarter. A large number of the latter were forced out of the ravine over the point of a hill to the north. The descent here is some twenty or thirty feet, and almost perpendicular, and over this pursuers and pursued both rushed headlong, horses and men tumbling over each other, the men fighting and struggling for dear life, until the bank was reached and the fight became a butchery. The Crees plunged into the current, and moved across almost in a solid mass, while the Blackfeet halted on the brink and shot them down like sheep. To use Jerry Potts' expression: "you could fire with your eyes shut and be sure to kill a Cree". The scene now, and during the charge, must have been one not easily forgotten. The river valley was filled with dust and smoke, the air resounded with the report of rifles and the deafening war cries of the Blackfeet, while thick and fast came the death yells of the Crees.

The slaughter did not end at the river. The Blackfeet followed the Crees across, and being joined by a large contingent of their

brethren, who had crossed higher up, the butchery went on, and on one spot where the Crees made a sort of stand, about fifty of them were killed. It is a matter of fact that in the confusion and excitement of the pursuit, some of the Blackfeet were killed by their own friends, while Crees, mingling with the Blackfeet, escaped. Finally the Crees reached a clump of trees immediately in front of the present entrance of the Galt mine(the residence of Mr. E. T. Galt, general manager of the Alberta Railway and Coal Company, now stands on this spot,), and having abandoned most of their horses, took refuge there, and made a last stand. The Blackfeet collected all the horses and virtually surrounded the place.

Such was the great battle of the fall of '70. Cairns of stones along the edge of the ravines mark to this day the place where the Blackfeet braves fell. It is difficult to estimate the loss of the Crees, on account of so many having been killed in the river, and their bodies swept away by the current, but it is certain that it was betwen two and three hundred. About forty Blackfeet were killed and fifty wounded.

The following year the Crees sent tobacco to the Blackfeet and in the fall a formal treaty of peace was made between the two nations on the Red Deer River.